

FCC Fiddles While Companies Block Calls

HELENA, MT—Last week, 24 US Senators, including Montana’s Senators Tester and Baucus, sent a letter to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) urging the Commission to take “the necessary actions to protect consumers and ensure that the widespread and frequent occurrence of undelivered calls to rural areas is addressed.”

Rural telecom networks, which consistently provide superior voice and data services to their customers, are getting blamed for the failure of telephone calls to reach their customers. In fact, the calls are blocked “upstream;” *they never even arrive on the rural telecom’s network.*

As telecommunications technology evolves, companies providing long distance services have found ways either intentionally or negligently to block telephone traffic directed to rural parts of the country. As a result of such behavior, family members cannot reach their loved ones. Rural businesses are losing sales from customers who can’t reach them. And, as the Senators’ letter states, “incomplete calls raise a significant public safety concern that could yield devastating outcomes if this problem is not effectively and promptly addressed.”

You’d think given the potential risk to consumer safety and economic activity (i.e., jobs), the FCC would be all over this problem. Guess again. The FCC, the nation’s top telecom cop, has been all talk and no action while companies under its watch intentionally block telephone traffic or ignore taking necessary steps to ensure that all calls get through to all end-users.

Twenty-four Senators aren’t the only concerned parties to have brought this matter to the FCC’s attention. Last year, the Montana Public Service Commission (PSC) together with the Montana Legislative Consumer Committee, and separately again with other state PSCs, has sent letters to the FCC. (It turns

out the Chairman of the Consumer Committee is a victim of this scam.) The Montana Telecommunications Association has visited the FCC frequently. Other state and national associations, as well as public service commissions, among others, continually have visited and/or written to the FCC for over a year urging the agency to take forceful, immediate action. To no avail.

If you ask the FCC why it's fiddling while the integrity of the national telecommunications network burns, they'll say they're doing all sorts of stuff. But first, they shift the blame. The "root cause" of the problem, says the FCC, is not the negligent or criminal behavior of unscrupulous companies, but rather a regulatory pricing structure that makes terminating calls to rural areas more expensive than calls to urban areas. They may have identified a financial motive for "upstream" providers' unethical or illegal behavior; but instead of tracking down the culprits, incredibly they blame the victim—the rural telecom provider that never receives the calls that are being blocked upstream.

The National Telecommunications Cooperative Association (NTCA) recently analogized at yet another meeting at the FCC that "searching on rural networks for the problems with calls *that never reach those networks* is tantamount to addressing leaks in the roof of a house by staring at the resulting puddles of water on a basement floor; one might never get around to fixing the actual source of the problem through such an approach."

The FCC assures us that they "share our concerns and are dedicated to...ensuring high quality telephone services." They've "organized a call completion workshop;" they've "increas[ed] coordination" with an industry standards group; they're "working with [their] partners in state commissions;" and they're conducting "ongoing investigations" into the causes of this problem. In other words, besides talking about the problem, they've done nothing to stop it.

Rural telecom providers are getting blamed for poor call quality, when in fact calls never reach their networks because of the actions of originating or middle networks. The failure to complete calls is not just an inconvenience; it is a threat to public safety and commercial businesses and jobs in Rural America.



It's good to know that the U.S. Senate has enjoined the FCC on this issue. So have the states and rural telecom industry. What more does it take to get real, concrete, effective *action*—not just words—from the FCC?

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